

## **Learning to call one another friends:**

### **The Primate's Commission on Discovery, Reconciliation and Justice**

**June 2014**

“Discovery”—it’s such a hopeful word. It suggests new ideas, new visions, a brighter future. But when we join it with that legalistic noun, “doctrine,” we end up with something much more sinister—something called the “Doctrine of Discovery.”

The Doctrine of Discovery (DoD) developed through a series of pronouncements that European church and state leaders began making in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to offer theological justification for the empire-building drive of the European nation-states. It has poisoned Canada’s—and the Anglican Church’s—relationship with the First Peoples ever since the first encounters, and so, our Primate, the Very Rev. Fred Hiltz and National Aboriginal Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald, have set up a commission to look at the Doctrine and our history together in depth, and try to figure out what we all need to do about it.

In a nutshell, the DoD gives the Christian nations of Europe not just the right, but the God-given duty, to take over any unoccupied lands—the latin phrase is Terra Nullius— they discover and bring to them the “benefits” of a “Christian civilization.” For us white Europeans, this has meant:

- clearing and cultivating the land;
- imposing rule over the people we encountered (who as non-Christians without gunpowder were considered little more than wild beasts);
- converting them to our specific versions of Christianity; and, of course,
- grabbing for king and country, all the resources we could hunt, trap, trade, steal, cut down or dig up.

Imperial England and France brought the DoD to the part of Turtle Island we now call Canada. Their arrival began centuries of conquest, subjugation and quasi-legal oppression of the Indigenous peoples who were already here—and mostly living in sustainable relationship with the land and with one another. It was a process of “legalized” oppression that European leaders had already long been imposing on their own peoples.

This oppression has changed faces over the years and in different places. But it continues even today, in subtler forms. The DoD is still being cited in legal decisions.

The Anglican Church of Canada is a child of the Doctrine of Discovery. We grew out of our parent Church of England, and we promoted the DoD in almost everything we did, but particularly through our eager, century-long support for the Indian Residential School system. In many ways, our faith and the DoD were mutually inclusive.

Thankfully, the church is changing, slowly. We stopped running the residential schools in 1969, we apologized for our role in them in 1993, and since 1991, we have been actively working towards healing and right relations. In 2010, General Synod renounced the Doctrine of Discovery as “fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God”—in other words, as unchristian.

The 2010 Synod also committed the church to a major program of study on how the DoD has influenced Anglican attitudes and actions over four and a half centuries—since there’s no point renouncing a thing if you don’t know what it means.

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BY [GENERAL SYNOD COMMUNICATIONS](#) ON JUNE 9, 2014 | [EDIT](#)

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*At General Synod 2013 Archbishop Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, announced his intention to form a commission on Discovery, Reconciliation and Justice. Members of the commission were recently named and had their first meeting. What follows is an account of their time together so far written by Commission member John Bird. To find out more, please visit the [Commission’s webpage](#).*

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Which brings us back to the Primate’s Commission on Discovery, Reconciliation and Justice. Established this year, the Commission held its first meeting in Toronto in April. Membership is balanced by gender, as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks. I am fortunate enough to be able to sit on this commission with some wonderfully wise and spiritual people (see <http://www.anglican.ca/primate/communications/commission-on-discovery-reconciliation-justice/biographical-info/> for biographical details).

For me, our first meeting together was a holy time, fed by prayer, worship and circle reflection on the Gospel. I couldn’t shake the feeling all weekend that we had been called together for a sacred purpose. It is a great privilege—and responsibility—to have been invited into this group.

After opening worship and gospel reflections on our first morning together, Archbishop Hiltz shared his hopes for the Commission, namely that it will provide leadership to the church:

1. in learning how our humanity continues to be distorted by the DoD, and how we can work together to dismantle it and overcome its effects;
2. in continuing and strengthening our struggle for true justice for Indigenous peoples, both within and outside the church, and for reconciliation among all our peoples.

During our first afternoon together, Bishop MacDonald and Indigenous Ministries Coordinator, the Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor, took us through our first serious reflection on how the DoD continues to affect us. The bishop described the Doctrine as “five hundred years of thought that became a choking reality. Wherever you see a denial of Indigenous rights, that is the Doctrine of Discovery in action. If the church tries to destroy an Indigenous culture, that’s the Doctrine of Discovery.”

Indigenous peoples have also internalized the Doctrine, said the bishop. “We have become complicit in our own oppression.” The good news is that “a weight lifts off you as you finally come to understand that you have been colonized.”

Canon Doctor then took us through an experiential process to identify and sit with the knowledge of all we have lost to the DoD, either as Indigenous peoples or as settlers.

Sadly, the Indigenous members of the commission found it all too easy to fill pages of flip-chart paper delineating their ongoing losses. It was a heavy moment to see them all listed, including: land (food and livelihood); language (ceremony); symbols (drum, rattle pipe, four medicines); identity (self-esteem); families (communities, relationships); stories (teachings, oral traditions); free will and power (freedom of movement); hope; humanity, dignity, innocence (childhood); spirituality (traditional teachers, Indigenous theology).

The result is clear: poverty (economic and spiritual); the ongoing, intergenerational cycle of abuse and family violence (physical and emotional); violence against women and children; high rates of suicide; substance abuse and related tragedies; disease (diabetes, heart disease, etc.); gangs and high incarceration rates; mental illness; and passivity and despair.

And although settlers gained wealth, land and power, all at the expense of Indigenous neighbours, those supposed gains have come at great cost to our own humanity. We suffer from: a colonizer mentality; an internalized sense of white superiority, racism and stereotypes that separate us from one another; a stratified society where only some are powerful and wealthy and the rest live in a climate of fear and scarcity. Moreover, we can only carry on this injustice by denying reality and blaming those we have victimized. Or as Jesus so pointedly said: “What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses his soul?” (Matthew 16: 26, NIRV)

On our second day together, we began to understand just how pervasive—and yet hard to discern—the effects of the DoD remain, when we recognized that even the name and nature of our group, “the Primate’s Commission,” is a reflection of the Doctrine. Although the Primate and the National Aboriginal Bishop had agreed together on the need for, and composition of, the commission, under current church structure, it is still the privilege of the primate (elected by an overwhelming majority of settler church people from one of their own) to actually form the commission.

The Ven. Sid Black, one of the commissioners and co-chair of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, pointed out that the original vision of the Council was that the National Aboriginal Bishop would be the Primate of the Aboriginal Church. And yet, admitted Bishop MacDonald, there are still some Aboriginal congregations he has not been allowed to visit by the local diocesan bishop, whose power within the traditional structure still holds sway.

Recognizing that we still have a long road to travel together towards dismantling the DoD, and towards the true justice that will lead to real reconciliation, the commission agreed to meet again in the fall—in Six Nations territory.

As Archdeacon Black pointed out, “Jesus told his disciples, I don’t call you servants any more. You are my friends.” Following Jesus’ example, we commission members are determined to become true friends with one another, so that, together, we can go about this work of dismantling the structures of the Doctrine of Discovery—and creating true justice. We invite you all to join us on that journey.

—John Bird